

FBI's Embassy Wiretaps Known to 3 U.S. Presidents

By David Kraslow
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The FBI tapped telephone wires of the Dominican Republic Embassy in Washington from time to time during at least the last three Administrations — and Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson all knew it.

Exposure of this sensitive wiretapping operation is an outgrowth of the Bobby Baker bugging controversy.

The FBI, it was further understood, also tapped the telephone of Juan Bosch in Puerto Rico, where the former Dominican president, then in exile, was residing during the

Dominican rebellion in the spring of 1965.

It is because Baker, then the influential secretary to Senate Democrats, telephoned the Dominican Embassy several times in 1961, that the FBI wiretapping operation has now been compromised. The tap monitored all calls to the embassy, including Baker's.

It was understood that Baker, whose many-faceted extra-curricular activities later led to his downfall, telephoned the embassy in connection with some of his business interests — including a meat-packing plant in Haiti.

Baker has since been indicted

on Federal larceny, tax and conspiracy charges. Baker's lawyers are seeking in Federal Court here to have the charges killed, claiming that illegal electronic eavesdropping by the FBI contaminated the evidence against Baker.

The government had admitted that Baker conversations in Las Vegas and Washington were monitored by the FBI during electronic surveillance of some Baker associates in an organized crime investigation.

But in at least the public portion of pre-trial hearings before U.S. District Judge Oliver Gasch last month, there was no mention of

Baker calls having been monitored in the wiretapping of the Dominican Embassy. This information has now leaked.

It is believed the Government discussed the wiretap in private with Judge Gasch in the presence of Baker's attorneys. The Government reportedly asked the judge to seal this information because of the national security implications.

Justice Department lawyers contended in the hearings that no information obtained by bugging was used to build the criminal case against Baker.

In June, 1965, President Johnson ordered a ban on all electronic eavesdropping by Federal agencies, with the exception of national security cases and in those only with the approval of the Attorney General.

The policy of permitting FBI wiretapping in selected national security investigations, with specific authority from the Attorney General, was initiated by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and has been adhered to by all of his successors.

It has been generally assumed that the FBI has at various times tapped foreign embassies and the residences of foreign diplomats, but hard information about this practice has never surfaced.

In recent years, the number of FBI national security wiretaps in effect at any given time has averaged between 35 and 40. FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover told a House committee last Feb. 10 that 32 national security wiretaps were then operational. During World War II the number of FBI wiretap ran as high as 140.

The State Department not only has known about the tapping of the Dominican Embassy, but has been fed whatever intelligence was gathered in the surveillance.

Some observers believe such information was particularly useful to American policy-makers during the Dominican civil war last year. Bosch, for example, was in frequent touch with rebel leaders in Santo Domingo by telephone from his home in Puerto Rico.